

Australia: Victorian teachers face fight with Labor governments over pay and conditions

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Public school teachers in the Australian state of Victoria will stop work on Thursday for mass meetings on their fight for substantially higher pay, smaller class sizes and a reduction in contract teaching. A serious campaign on these long-outstanding issues, however will require a direct political struggle against the state Labor government, as well as the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd.

Under pressure from its members, the Australian Education Union (AEU) has submitted a claim for a 30 percent wage rise over three years and a maximum of 20 students per class in primary and secondary schools. Premier John Brumby's state government, however, has offered only an annual pay rise of 3.25 percent for three years, which would not even keep up with inflation. Anything above this figure must, according to Brumby, be the result of "productivity trade-offs"—which may entail further cuts to staffing or increased exploitation of the existing workforce.

Even compared to other Australian states, Victorian teachers are abysmally paid and government schools chronically underfunded. Victoria spends an average of \$8,686 per student—almost \$1,000 less than New South Wales and almost \$2,000 less than Western Australia. An experienced teacher in Victoria is paid \$65,414 a year, compared with \$72,454 in NSW.

The state Labor government has not only matched, but outdone, the Liberals under former Premier Jeff Kennett in running down the public education system. The Liberals lost office in 1999 after closing hundreds of schools, sacking thousands of teachers, destroying 70,000 public sector jobs and privatising state utilities. Labor has continued the visible deterioration of schools and accelerated privatisation, while handing billions of dollars in tax breaks to business.

Last October, the Brumby government threatened to use punitive provisions in the former Howard government's "WorkChoices" industrial relations laws against nurses fighting for better pay and conditions. The nurses' dispute underlined the lack of any fundamental differences between Labor and Liberal.

Nevertheless, the AEU campaigned for the election of a federal Labor government, claiming it would lead to an

improvement in state education. Instead, the Rudd government has declared that it will inflict "pain" by slashing billions of dollars in spending, starting with the May budget, and insisted that workers must accept "wage restraint" despite soaring inflation.

It is also clear that Rudd's much-touted "Education Revolution" has nothing to do with improving public schools. It involves tying education to the immediate labour force needs identified by industry. Labor's policy documents refer to education as "human capital formation". Teachers will be relegated to an increasingly technical role with little or no emphasis on the development of critical thought. At the same time, Rudd has maintained the Howard government's inequitable funding formulae that blatantly favour wealthy private schools.

The AEU's past record demonstrates that it will acquiesce to the entire thrust of Labor's agenda, as long as the union remains involved as a partner. Many teachers would be unaware that the Log of Claims restates almost word-for-word entire sections of the *Victorian Government Schools Agreement 2004*. Under this agreement the union surrendered any definite ceiling on class sizes as well as the amount of classes taught, and sanctioned a blowout in the proportion of contract teaching positions. In short, the Log of Claims represents an almost identical set of conditions to those teachers are protesting against.

At the last mass meeting in November, outrage was expressed at the situation confronting young teachers who are placed on short-term contracts with no security of employment. Yet, the union has already given the green light for the government to keep nearly 20 percent of the workforce in this form of employment.

Both the Log of Claims and the 2004 agreement state: "The parties are committed to the standard mode of employment in the Teaching Service being on-going. However the parties recognise that some fixed-term or casual employment will continue to be necessary". The government used the 2004 agreement to place even more young teachers on contracts.

The government is exploiting the current negotiations to deepen the attack on public education on a number of fronts. A spokesman told the *Age* that it wants to introduce a series of

“reforms”, including offering “high performing” teachers bonuses to work in lower socio-economic suburbs where school outcomes are below the state average. Such measures will not redress the massive educational problems that exist, but pave the way for the imposition of “performance pay”.

The AEU Log of Claims itself argues for “intervention in and targeted support for those schools that are demonstrably under performing both in student outcomes and on other indicators”. The document also calls for “performance and development arrangements that recognise high performance”. Already, the federal AEU has announced its agreement with Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard on the need for “merit-based” pay.

The campaign for merit pay seeks to divert public attention from grossly inadequate funding levels, the impact of poverty on students, and the need to provide vastly improved resources in working class areas. Research published last year by Melbourne University education associate professor Stephen Lamb showed that after two decades of amalgamations and closures, schools in the poorer areas of Melbourne had become “sink” schools, “denuded of student numbers and resources, and, thanks to these changes, repositories of academic failure”.

A survey conducted by the *Age* has found that half the secondary schools in the northern working class suburbs of Melbourne are in the bottom 20 percent of the state as far as Year 12 exam results are concerned. In primary schools, the disadvantage is just as great—nearly 40 percent of primary schools in these neighbourhoods are in the bottom 20 percent of the standard reading benchmarks.

Conditions in schools cannot be improved by providing more incentives for a few hand-picked teachers. The main factors determining teachers’ performance are the type of school in which they work, class sizes, the availability of resources and the amount of time given for preparation.

Linking teachers’ pay to their students’ results worsens the situation for those who need help the most. Teachers will invariably spend most of their time with students deemed capable of substantial improvement. Moreover, the introduction of pay for performance will increase the powers of principals. They will operate like CEOs, rewarding so-called high performers with bonus payments while having the power to hire and fire short-term contract teachers.

The teachers’ union has collaborated in virtually every other government initiative. For instance, the AEU claims that the latest round of school amalgamations and closures in Dandenong, Broadmeadows, Bendigo, Heidelberg and Echuca is inspired by community input. In fact, many communities have been forced to accept amalgamations because schools face a protracted decline due to lack of funds.

As with the 2004 agreement, the AEU is again providing support for the government’s “Blueprint” for education. This regime essentially means running education along business lines, comparing and benchmarking schools with similar socio-economic rankings. Schools deemed “underperforming” may

have their administrations replaced and face declining enrolments and funding.

The Log of Claims expresses the union’s desire to keep working hand-in-glove with the government. It calls for an “appropriate role for workplace union representatives” and for “consultative arrangements”. Like the 2004 agreement, the document bars industrial action even when onerous conditions are imposed. The Log of Claims outlines a bureaucratic procedure whereby an individual teacher must lodge a form with the union, which decides if a particular grievance over workload is genuine. If there is no resolution, the dispute goes to an industrial court, the Industrial Relations Commission.

Despite overwhelming support for the pay and conditions demands among teachers, the union has done next to nothing to mobilise its members, including for this week’s stopwork meetings. Over the past decade the AEU has channeled teachers and parents’ anger into meaningless protests that serve to disperse opposition. In the current campaign, the union will no doubt stick to this time-worn formula. The official resolution on February 14 will propose regional four-hour morning stoppages throughout the first two terms of school.

In order to advance their conditions and secure the right for students to a decent education, teachers need to break out of the entire pro-business framework of the Labor Party and the trade unions. Teachers should take their struggle out of the hands of the AEU leadership and extend their actions to include parents, students and all working people. What is at stake is the broader issue of the subordination of education to corporate profit.

Teachers need a socialist strategy, one that confronts the underlying political questions. They need to link up with every other section of the working class now facing industrial closures, soaring interest rates and rising prices. With Rudd’s government determined to impose the full burden of the worsening global economic crisis on the working class, a mass, independent political movement of working people must be built—one that challenges the very basis of the capitalist system itself.



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